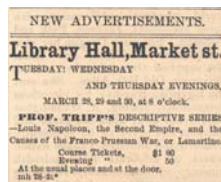


Association members were seeking a new home for their collection

Finally, in 1874, the group took a 10-year lease on the second floor of the Masonic Hall building at 125-127 Market Street and remained there until 1895.

It was the heyday of public speaking. The Association sponsored numerous reading clubs, debates and musical entertainments. Orators from across the globe were heard by eager Wilmingtonians.



Wilmington Morning Star
March 28, 1876

A Tale of Two Cities

While the Wilmington Library Association's members were white citizens, Wilmington's African-American community had its own literary societies, lyceums and libraries.

As early as 1870, there were organized groups of black Wilmingtonians whose leaders were principally ministers and free blacks educated in the North.

One such group was the Colored Literary Society, which provided night school for men.

Some of the larger African-American churches had libraries. St. Stephen's AME Church provided a community library in its annex building.



Harper's Weekly
December 6, 1873

Forums for public speaking were promoted by groups such as the Benjamin Banneker Literary and Library Association in the 1880s and the Daniel A. Payne Lyceum in the 1890s.

Frederick Douglass, world famous abolitionist, author and civil rights leader, spoke in City Hall on August 1, 1872.

It was not until 1926 that the city began supporting a free public library for African-Americans.

The First Librarian

Despite the popularity of its programs and collection, the Wilmington Library Association, headed by extraordinary bibliophile Dr. Thomas Fanning Wood, could not raise enough money for rent, new books and a librarian's salary. Finally, in the 1880s, the group decided to give its extensive collection to the newly formed Young Men's Christian Association Library.

A public outcry ensued, and one generous man saved the library for another decade.

Captain William H. Bixby was the first Wilmington District Engineer for the US Army Corps of Engineers from 1884-1891. Bixby volunteered to manage the library,



Thomas Fanning Wood
1841-1892

and he donated over \$1,000 to update the collection.

Wilmington's first professional librarian was hired: Miss A. L. Sargent of Lowell, Massachusetts. Miss Sargent employed the latest library standards of cataloging and collection development.

Captain Bixby had electric lights installed and extended library hours. By the time he left Wilmington in 1891, there were 4100 volumes in the collection. Membership had increased dramatically and circulation doubled.

With Bixby's departure in 1891 and the death of Dr. Wood in 1892, the Wilmington Library Association finally relinquished their holdings to the YMCA in 1893. The Association continued to meet there until it dissolved at the end of 1899. Many of the Association's records are in the historical collection of the New Hanover Public Library.



Wilmington YMCA 1895



Captain William H. Bixby
US Army Corps of Engineers

A Determined Group of Women

After the demise of the Wilmington Library Association, the North Carolina Sorosis, the oldest federated women's club in North Carolina, took up the cause for a Free Public Library.

In 1901, Miss Margaret Littlejohn Kingsbury introduced the idea of petitioning the city government to provide space for a public library.

In the meantime, the Board of Aldermen turned down the offer of a free Carnegie Library, considering the required annual appropriation of \$2500 to be too much of a burden to taxpayers.

Sorosis Club members persisted in their efforts. They opened a temporary library in the Masonic Temple on Front Street and later in the new Odd Fellows building on South 3rd. In 1904, they relentlessly pressured the city aldermen for a permanent location. "It is a shame and a disgrace," they argued, "that the largest and wealthiest town in the state has not an institution of this kind."

In 1906 their dream came true.

